January 4, 2019
1420 East 6th Ave.
P.O. Box 200701
Helena, MT 59620-0701

Environmental Quality Council
Montana Department of Environmental Quality
Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks
Fisheries Division
Native Species Coordinator, Fisheries
Region 2 Office
Montana State Library, Helena
MT Environmental Information Center
Montana Audubon Council
Montana Wildlife Federation
Granite Conservation District
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Helena
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Helena
State Historic Preservation Office, Helena
Hesse and Sons, LLC
Trout Unlimited

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Enclosed is an Environmental Assessment (EA) prepared for the Future Fisheries Improvement Program (FFIP). The Program tentatively plans to provide partial funding toward improving fish passage on Ross Fork Rock Creek, a tributary to Rock Creek. The project site is 0.5 miles downstream of the U.S. Forest Service boundary on Ross Creek in Granite County, and approximately 20 miles southwest of Phillipsburg.

Please submit any comments by 11:59 PM on February 3, 2019 to Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks at the address listed above. The funding for this project through the FFIP is contingent upon approval being granted by the Fish & Wildlife Commission. If you have any questions, feel free to contact me at (406) 444-2432. Please note that this draft EA will be considered as final if no substantive comments are received by the deadline listed above.

Sincerely,

Michelle McGree, Program Officer
Fish Management Bureau
Fisheries Division
e-mail: mmcgree@mt.gov

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT
Fisheries Division
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
Ross Fork Rock Creek fish passage

General Purpose: The 1995 Montana Legislature enacted sections 87-1-272 through 273, MCA that direct Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) to administer a Future Fisheries Improvement Program (FFIP). The program involves providing funding for physical projects to restore degraded fish habitat in rivers and lakes for the purpose of improving wild fisheries. The legislature established an earmarked funding account to help accomplish this goal. Additionally, the 1999 Montana Legislature amended statute sections 87-1-273, 15-38-202 and Section 5, Chapter 463, Laws of 1995 to create a bull trout and cutthroat trout enhancement program. This legislation was amended again in 2013 to open the program to all native fish species (statute section 87-1-283). The program now calls for the enhancement of native fish through habitat restoration, natural reproduction and reductions in species competition by way of the FFIP.

The FFIP tentatively plans to provide partial funding toward the removal of two undersized culverts and the installation of a rail car farm bridge to reconnect Ross Fork Rock Creek. The overall goal is to reconnect spawning habitat for bull trout, westslope cutthroat trout, and other aquatic species.

I. Location of Project:

This project will be conducted on Ross Fork Creek, a tributary to Rock Creek, southwest of Phillipsburg within Township 5N, Range 16W, Section 24 in Granite County (Figure 1). The project site is located 0.5 miles south of the U.S. Forest Service Boundary and 23 miles from the confluence with Rock Creek.

II. Need for the Project:

One goal within FWP's six-year operations plan for the fisheries program is to "protect, maintain, and restore native fish populations, their habitats, life cycles, and genetic diversity to ensure stewardship of native species."

This project improves habitat for bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout, two native species and Species of Concern in Montana. Bull trout are listed as a federally threatened species. Two adjacent undersized culverts are currently acting as velocity barriers to fish and disrupting natural stream function (Figure 2). By upgrading undersized culverts to a farm bridge, Ross Fork Ross Creek would be fully connected to Rock Creek and 15 miles of spawning and rearing habitat would be accessible. Connectivity and increased habitat are expected to improve fish populations throughout their life cycles as well as support genetic diversity of these species. This location is a high priority for fish passage improvement.

III. Scope of the Project:

The project proposes to provide partial funding toward the removal of two undersized culverts and the installation of a farm bridge on Ross Fork Rock Creek (Figure 3). Two rock weirs will be built in the

project area to maintain streambed stability after culvert removal. The bridge will be 50 feet long by 18 feet wide and use a rail car and concrete eco blocks for bridge abutments. The abutments will be backfilled using project site material and locally sourced rock will be placed inside the abutments to prevent scour. The overall goal is to reconnect habitat for bull trout, westslope cutthroat trout, and other aquatic species.

This project is expected to cost $42,820. Of this total, the FFIP would be contributing up to $21,400 to complete the project. The remainder would be matched from the other sources, including those listed below.

Contributor	In-kind services	In-kind cash
Trout Unlimited	$8,500	$9,920
Landowner		$3,000
TOTAL: $21,400		

IV. Environmental Impact Review Checklist:

Evaluation of the impacts of the Proposed Action including secondary and cumulative impacts on the Physical and Human Environment

Project Title: Ross Fork Ross Creek fish passage
Division/Bureau: Fisheries Division / Fish Management Bureau (FFIP)
Description of Project: The FFIP tentatively plans to provide partial funding toward the removal of two adjacent, undersized culverts and the installation of a farm bridge to reconnect Ross Fork Rock Creek. The overall goal is to reconnect habitat for bull trout, westslope cutthroat trout, and other aquatic species.

A. POTENTIAL IMPACTS TO THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

Will the proposed action result in potential impacts to:	Unknown	Potentially Significant	Minor	None	Can Be Mitigated	Comments Provided
1. Geology and soil quality, stability and moisture				X		
2. Air quality or objectionable odors				X		
3. Water quality, quantity and distribution (surface or groundwater)			X			X
4. Existing water right or reservation				X		
5. Vegetation cover, quantity and quality				X		

6. Unique, endangered, or fragile vegetative species				X		
7. Terrestrial or aquatic life and/or habitats			X			X
8. Unique, endangered, or fragile wildlife or fisheries species			X			X
9. Introduction of new species into an area				X		
10. Changes to abundance or movement of species			X			X

B. POTENTIAL IMPACTS ON THE HUMAN ENVIRONMENT

Will the proposed action result in potential impacts to:	Unknown	Potentially Significant	Minor	None	Can Be Mitigated	Comments Provided
1. Noise and/or electrical effects				X		
2. Land use				X		
3. Risk and/or health hazards				X		
4. Community impact				X		
5. Public services/taxes/utilities				X		
6. Potential revenue and/or project maintenance costs				X		
7. Aesthetics and recreation				X		
8. Cultural and historic resources				X		X
9. Evaluation of significance				X		
10. Generate public controversy				X		

V. Explanation of Impacts to the Physical Environment

3. Water quantity, quality, and distribution.

No changes in streamflow would occur in Ross Fork Rock Creek as a result of the proposed project. Short-term increases in turbidity may occur during project construction. To minimize turbidity, operation of equipment in the stream channel will be minimized to the extent practicable. A 318 authorization will be obtained, if necessary, to meet short-term water quality standards.

7. Terrestrial or aquatic life and/or habitats.

This project would replace undersized culverts with a bridge designed to accommodate stream flows greater thank bankfull. The replacement would allow for natural stream conditions and remove the velocity barrier, allowing for upstream migration of westslope cutthroat trout and

bull trout and increasing overall habitat access. All changes are expected to be positive.

8. Unique, endangered, or fragile wildlife or fisheries species

This project will allow for upstream passage of bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout, helping to ensure long-term persistence. Both species are Species of Concern in Montana and bull trout are federally threatened. Increased connectivity and available habitat tends to make populations more resilient and numerous. Any changes are expected to be positive.

10. Changes to abundance or movement of species.

The replacement of the culvert with an appropriately sized bridge will restore connectivity within Ross Fork Rock Creek. The structure will allow complete fish passage and overall movement is expected to increase, which will improve the amount of available habitat for fish species. Additional habitat is expected to translate to increased survival and resiliency through additional places for fish to live, rest, grow, and move when there are threats. The impact is considered positive and is expected to positively impact bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout populations in the Rock Creek drainage.

VI. Explanation of Impacts to the Human Environment

8. Cultural and historic resources.

No cultural or historical resource impacts are anticipated. However, the State Historical Preservation Office will be notified of the project, and any potential concerns will be addressed.

VII. Narrative Evaluation and Comment.

There are no anticipated cumulative effects.

VIII. Discussion and Evaluation of Reasonable Alternatives.

1. No Action Alternative.

If no funding is provided through the FFIP, either the applicant would have to seek additional sources of funding to complete the project, or the affected area of Ross Fork Rock Creek would remain a passage barrier.

2. The Proposed Alternative.

The proposed alternative intends to provide partial funding through the FFIP to restore Ross Fork Rock Creek and reconnect it for fish passage.

IX. Environmental Assessment Conclusion Section.

1. Other groups or agencies contacted or which may have overlapping jurisdiction:

Montana Department of Environmental Quality
Granite County Conservation District
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
Montana Department of Natural Resources
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

2. Evaluation and listing of mitigation, stipulation, or other control measures enforceable by the agency or another government agency:

None.

3. Is an EIS required?

No. We conclude, from this review, that the proposed activities will have an overall positive impact on the physical and human environment, and will therefore not require the extensive analysis associated with an EIS.

4. Level of public involvement.

The project application to the FFIP has been posted on the FWP webpage for public comment. No comments have been received to date. The proposed project was reviewed and supported by the public review panel of the FFIP. The proposed project also will be reviewed by the Fish & Wildlife Commission, and funding will be contingent upon their approval. The EA will be distributed to all individuals and groups listed on the cover letter and will be published on the FWP webpage: **www.fwp.mt.gov**.

5. Duration of comment period?

Public comment will be accepted through 11:59 PM, February 3, 2019.

6. Person(s) responsible for preparing the EA.

Michelle McGree, Program Officer
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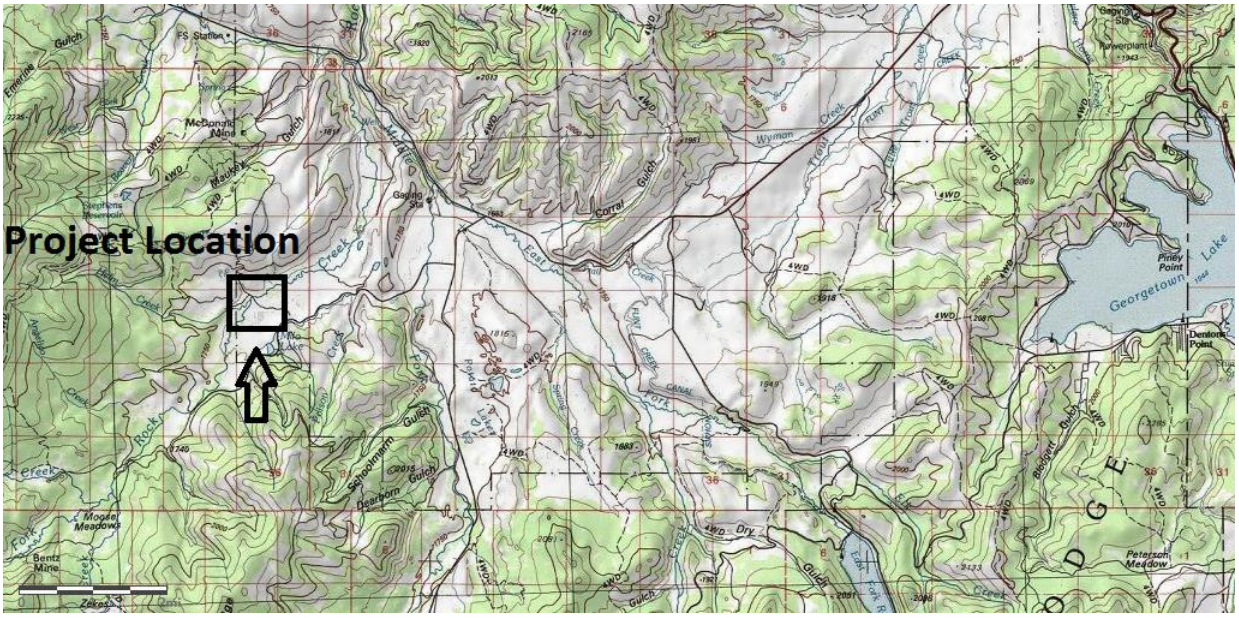
Helena, MT 59620
Telephone: (406) 444-2432, E-mail: mmcgree@mt.gov
Contributor: Teresa Scanlon, Trout Unlimited

Figure 1: Project location



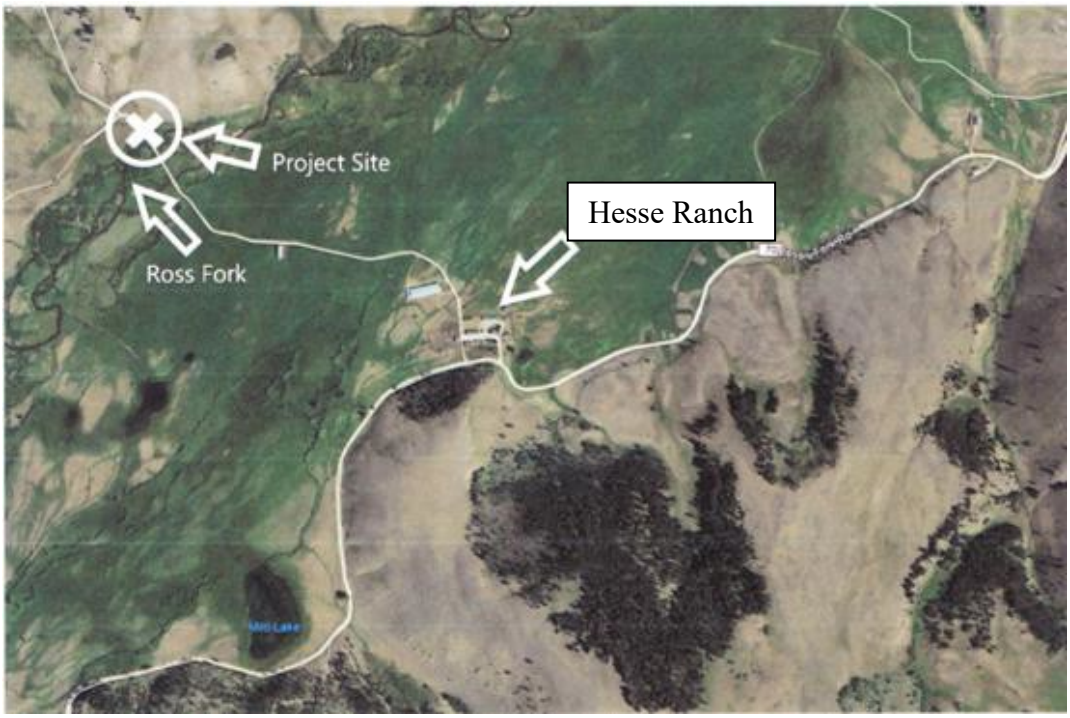


Figure 2: Current Conditions

Culvert inlet –July 2017

Culvert outlet –July 2017

Figure 3. Project design